

AGENT: ALUMNI GROWTH AND ENGAGEMENT ACROSS NEW TECHNOLOGIES

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Abstract

The AGENT project aims to use social networking technologies (LinkedIn and Facebook) to support the development of undergraduates' employability and career development. The focus of the project is on e-mentoring by alumni to provide a 'bridge' between individuals whose social ties and connections are weakened by time and distance, whilst at the same time capitalising on the learning opportunities afforded by the widening of social networks. Social networking sites (SNSs) have been shown to provide students with the tools to make connections, build relationships and support personal development. From a social capital perspective, SNSs can support 'weak ties' by allowing students to grow a social network from which to draw resources in the form of information, knowledge, advice and expertise that an institution's alumni can provide. Alumni are a key resource for building professional networking communities that can provide offline as well as online support to students. We report on an on-going JISC project –AGENT (Alumni Growth and Engagement across New Technologies) that explores how Web 2.0 technologies engage alumni, create the sense of belonging, develop more effective and mutually-beneficial alumni-student connections and associated positive social capital outcomes.

Keywords: AGENT, alumni, e-mentoring, social capital, social networks, employability

Paper type: Research in Progress

1 INTRODUCTION

Social networking sites (SNSs) provide undergraduate students with the tools to connect to alumni and expand their network, which in the case of LinkedIn is business-oriented in making 'relationships matter' with professionals to support growth and learning (Rajagopal et al., 2012). This relationship-building approach shifts the emphasis from finance (e.g., endowments) as a resource to be mobilised, to information, knowledge, skills, which are resources accumulated through the relationships among people, enriched by 'outsiders' (i.e., alumni) and accessed via social networks. Specifically, it is the existence of social capital within a university that allows students to draw on information and resources from other members of the networks to which they belong. This form of social capital is known as bridging – when a student leaves a university and joins a company a 'weak tie' is developed between the company and the university – and is reflected in loose connections between individuals who may provide knowledge transfer opportunities or new perspectives for one another (Granovetter, 2003; Putnam, 2000). Such interactions create cycles of engagement and a form of natural continuation reinforced by students' feelings as valued members of the community.

SNSs offer a number of benefits in life offline, for instance, creating a network of weak-tie relationships that brings success in job seeking including employment connections and advice (de Janasz and Forret, 2008; Granovetter, 1995); providing emotional well-being (Steinfeld et al., 2008) and forming and maintaining bridging social capital, which has been empirically tested in a series of seminal studies of college students' use of Facebook that found that less intense users who reported low satisfaction with college life also reported having much lower bridging social capital (fewer weak ties) than those who used Facebook more intensely (Ellison et al., 2006, 2007, 2011). However, connectivity does not equate to a sense of community and strategies such as e-mentoring via SNSs, which help to bring together alumni and students as mentors and mentees could prove a fruitful direction, but is only an emerging and under researched area with respect to nurturing career development and growing bridging social capital (Lee et al., 2011). The facilitation of social interaction via e-mentoring relationships cannot be underestimated in fostering forms of reciprocity, development of networks, trust, proactivity, value of life, participation and celebration of diversity, all of which are hallmarks of social capital. In the context of Higher Education it can lead to an enhanced student experience, which potentially enables future engagement post-graduation between alumni and the institution.

Alumni engagement is a fluid, non-linear process, but effectively begins at the early stages of the student lifecycle. It is dependent on students being able to build and maintain social networks through the development of networking skills so that they become co-producers of networking outputs, thus contributing to the development of social capital within the university (Villar and Albertin, 2010). Although, immediate challenges for successful online participation are represented by the fact that uptake of services such as LinkedIn by students is less than that of young professional users owing in part to a lack of awareness or a reluctance to engage in career-building activities to seek or utilise quality sources of advice (Gerard, 2011; Greenbank, 2011; Skeels and Grudin, 2009). Conversely, understanding how to harness established social networks and the role of social capital for engaging alumni as a resource to promote student support, particularly post-graduation has not been explored to any great extent in the literature (Hall, 2011). Although, recently some work has emerged that has examined the role of SNSs in engaging with alumni (Dunlap and Lowenthal, 2009; Hayden et al., 2010; Rosson et al., 2009). The imperative for universities given the job market downturns in the UK and elsewhere in the world is to become more creative in how they prepare students for the workplace and meet performance targets in graduate employability.

1.1 AGENT Project Overview

The AGENT project (www.agent-project.org) adopts the concept of social capital and applies it to undergraduate students and alumni within two subject areas: computing and business. It provides a theoretical underpinning to the project in understanding social connectedness and how a sense of community and its associated characteristics affect alumni engagement. Specifically, the project aims to examine the use of SNSs in developing a community of practice comprised of undergraduates and alumni in the context of mentoring that motivates employability, skills and career development of current undergraduates. Key foci in the project will be: the capture of employability needs; the links between social capital and alumni engagement to achieve a connected community; the contribution and quality of career focused alumni-undergraduate social networking groups; and the perceived value of social media or e-mentoring by undergraduates and alumni. This frames the following specific objectives:

- Improve engagement with alumni through technology-enabled processes
- Support the ways in which existing students connect with alumni and build mutually-beneficial relationships that reinforce positive feelings for the home institution
- Blueprint processes and redesign services to improve the student/alumnus experience with respect to investment in social capital
- Identify the employability and career development needs of undergraduates and alumni and use the knowledge gained to offer relevant support and advice to both groups

- Deliver a model of alumni engagement that can be rolled out to other university departments and build partnerships relevant to improving employability
- Contribute to, and share experiences with, the wider higher education (HE) community with respect to developing alumni engagement processes using social networking technologies.

The paper is structured as follows: section 2 provides a brief background to related work and highlights the key concepts under research. Section 3 presents the research methodology adopted in the project. Finally, section 4 summarises the anticipated impacts of the AGENT project.

2 RELATED WORK

2.1 Alumni engagement via social media

Pierre Bourdieu defined social capital as “*the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition*” (Bourdieu 1983, p. 248). Although, a number of resources could be linked to create social capital - social networks, trust, civic engagement, and satisfaction with life (Bourdieu, 1983; Coleman, 1988; Valenzuela et al., 2009), others such as Lin (2001) and Putman (2004) suggest includes all resources which are generated through social interactions. Social capital has been generally linked with broad positive societal impacts (Helliwell and Putnam, 2004) such as better public health (Adler and Kwon, 2002), but on a micro-level increased social capital tends to improve community commitment (Ellison et al., 2007). Within the context of the AGENT project, the goal is to engage undergraduates with alumni so that they can create and maintain social connections – enabling them to develop social capital or ‘sense of belonging’ or ‘sense of community’ within a university. Thus, individuals can gain benefits of social capital - getting useful information, personal relations and ability to organise groups (Paxton, 1999). The focus of social capital within the AGENT project is particularly relevant as Lin (2001) advocates that social capital allows creation of opportunities for individuals (such as jobs) that are otherwise not available.

Whilst social capital theory has been increasingly adopted by scholars and practitioners in all disciplines for the last 25 years (Brunie, 2009), the proliferation of SNSs has reinvigorated the debate on social capital amongst researchers. SNSs foster different forms of social capital by the fact that they are web-enabled services, which allow people to create an online identity (or profile), connect with other people, and view their own as well others’ connections (boyd and Ellison, 2007). The use of SNSs for social capital formation has been highlighted by many studies. For instance, Thackeray and Hunter (2010) argue that the use of technology (SNSs) is vital in building social capital especially for young adults. Likewise, the research suggests that SNSs offer a low cost solution to build stronger ties and social capital by overriding the barriers of physical distances (Bargh and McKenna, 2004; Ellison et al., 2007). Specifically, SNSs support individuals in three ways (a) create opportunities to participate via connections, (b) socialise to an issue, and (c) help shape their decisions to become involved (Thackeray and Hunter, 2010).

Whilst previous research has focussed on alumni giving (Weerts et al., 2010), researchers have shown increasing interest in different forms of alumni engagement (Horseman, 2011). For example, Farrow and Yuan (2011) explore the role of SNSs to engage alumni through volunteerism and found a direct relationship between SNSs use and volunteerism and alumni giving. They contended that “*technical affordance of a communication technology on its own can bring about significant changes in behaviour*” (p.459). This reinforces the aforementioned proposition of Thackeray and Hunter (2010) that technology (SNSs) can play a pivotal role in building social capital.

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research project adopted a pluralist approach proposed by Mingers (2001) and utilised quantitative methods such as a survey as well as qualitative methods such as focus groups and interviews. The research was carried out in two stages. Figure 1 depicts the process of data collection in this project. During the first stage, the survey was used to collect data from undergraduate students studying in two different subject areas - Computing and Business. The survey focussed on three aspects: (a) understanding students' experience of being part of the university community - measured on scales such as self-perceived employability, ambition and university commitment; (b) the value of belonging to the university network - measured on social capital scales and (c) how they stay connected with friends particularly via SNSs – measured on intensity of use scale. The survey was developed by adapting existing scales: employability, ambition and university commitment items were adapted from Rothwell et al. (2008) whilst the scales of social capital and intensity of SNSs use were adapted from Ellison et al. (2007) in order to benefit from the use of pre-validated scales.

The survey was launched online between October 2011 and April 2012 and email invitations were sent to all $n=1958$ computing and business undergraduate students (level 1, level 2 and level 3). However, only 130 responses were collected online showing a response rate of 6.64% despite two reminder emails. Therefore, printed surveys were also physically distributed. Email requests stating the purpose of the study were sent to lecturers and their help was sought in administering the printed surveys. Accordingly, 102 additional responses were collected from the students, thus totalling 232 completed questionnaires with a response rate of 11.8%.

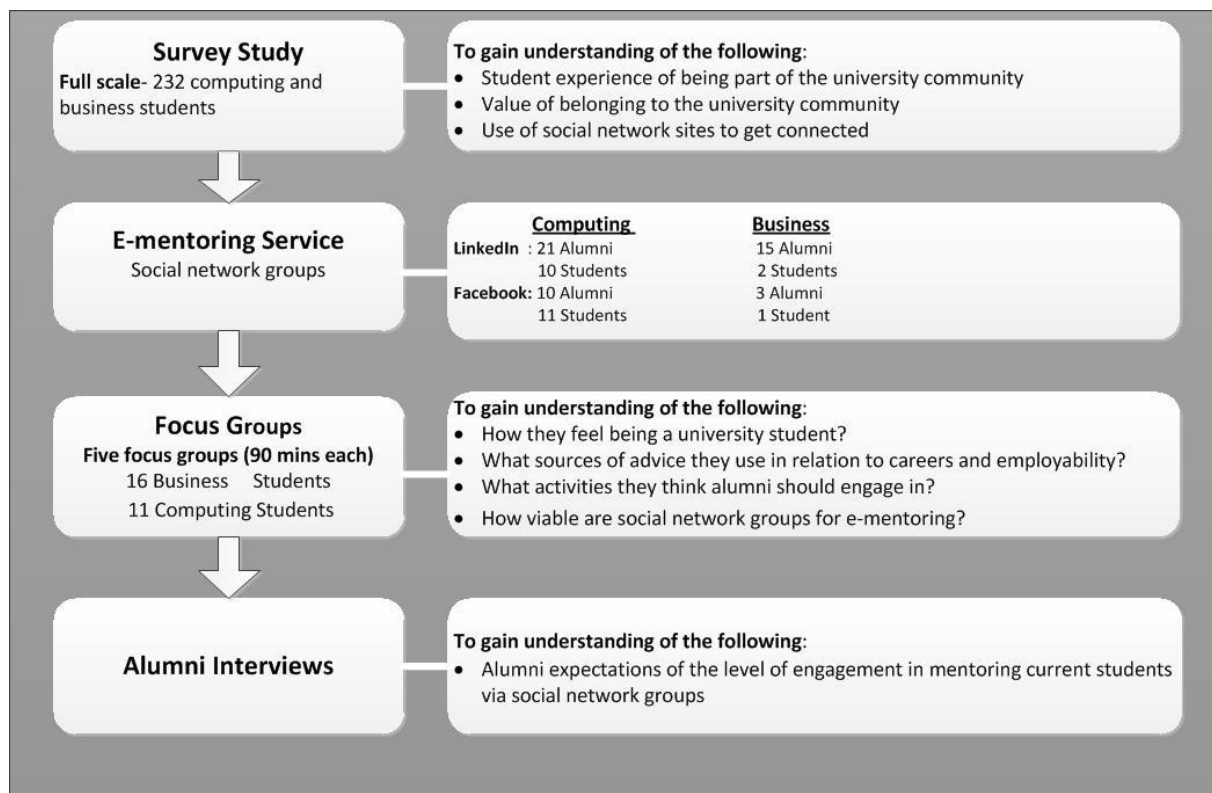


Figure 1. Overview of data collection methods

Specifically, an e-mentoring service was created to connect current undergraduates (mentees) with past students (alumni-mentors). The objective of this e-mentoring service was to build mutually-beneficial relationships that reinforce positive feelings for the home institution as well as provide support to current students for their career development and employability. The service was operationalised via LinkedIn and Facebook groups. Given the unique, albeit complementary, needs of computing and business students for career development and employability, separate groups were

created on LinkedIn and Facebook. Alumni were invited to join these groups based on the subject areas they graduated in, but were free to join both groups (e.g. at least one computing graduate also joined the business group).

During the second stage of the AGENT project, data was collected using qualitative methods such as focus groups and interviews. Focus groups were conducted to understand mentees' expectations of the e-mentoring service and the level and extent of alumni engagement. Specifically, focus groups were structured around four open-ended questions: (a) Feelings around being a university student; (b) Sources of advice accessed in relation to careers and employability; (c) Activities that support alumni-student engagement; and (d) Viability of social network groups for e-mentoring. Separate focus groups were conducted with level 1 (first year), level 2 (second year) and level 3 (third year) computing and business students with 27 participants in total. Each focus group discussion lasted for 90 minutes and was video recorded to enable systematic analysis. Participants' consent was obtained for video recording and compensation was paid in recognition of participants' time.

Semi-structured interviews are planned to gather alumni expectations of the level of engagement in mentoring current students via SNSs. The quantitative and qualitative data collected in the AGENT project will help identify the employability and career development needs of undergraduates and alumni in order to offer relevant support and advice to both the groups. It will also enable the researchers to blueprint processes and redesign services to improve the student-alumnus experience with respect to investment in social capital.

4 CONCLUSION

The anticipated project impacts can be described in four main ways: employability, student experience, alumni-student engagement, and technology-enabled processes. With respect to employability, the project will help raise student awareness in terms of developing a mentoring service as a platform for discussion and reflection on skills and career development and widening social networks. Improved understanding of the feelings (in terms of touchpoints) and expectations of students when seeking career development support and advice may enable much richer student experiences. Another impact is to encourage routes to participation in the university community via the use of the mentoring service and facilitate mutually-beneficial cycles of alumni-student engagement. Finally, technology-enabled processes may help establish best practice for communicating with students via social media tools.

The research and development activities undertaken to the present date suggest that the use of SNSs is positively associated with building and maintaining social capital in a university. Although, the use of LinkedIn and Facebook groups to engage alumni with current students shows promise, the issues of privacy and lack of trust challenge the successful adoption of SNSs for alumni-student engagement. However, with the available top down (strategic) and bottom up (operational) support from higher education institutions, alumni engagement via SNSs can prove to be a strategic resource for contributing to the employability agenda. Future research will look to producing empirical data and frameworks around the effective use of SNSs within the context of alumni-student engagement and associated design features that afford interaction and community support.

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